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LINCOLN AS AN ORATOR

Address delivered by Mr. Bryan at Springfield, Ill., February 12, 1909, at celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of birth of Abraham Lincoln

Lincoln's fame as a statesman and as the nation's chief executive during its most crucial period has so overshadowed his fame as an orator that his merits as a public speaker have not been sufficiently emphasized. When it is remembered that his nomination was directly due to the prominence which he won upon the stump; that in a most remarkable series of debates he held his own against one of the most brilliant orators America has produced; and that to his speeches, more than to the arguments of any other one man, or in fact, of all other public men combined, was due the success of his party—when all these facts are borne in mind, it will appear plain, even to the casual observer, that too little attention has been given to the extraordinary power which he exercised as a speaker. That his nomination was due to the effect that his speeches produced, can not be disputed. When he began his fight against slavery in 1854 he was but little known outside of the counties in which he attended court. It is true that he had been a member of congress some years before, but at that time he was not stirred by any great emotion or connected with the discussion of any important theme, and he made but little impression upon national politics. The threatened extension of slavery, however, aroused him, and with a cause which justified his best efforts, he threw his whole soul into the fight. The debates with Douglas have never had a parallel in this, or, so far as history shows, in any other country.

In engaging in this contest with Douglas he met a foeman worthy of his steel, for Douglas had gained a deserved reputation as a great debater, and recognized that his future depended upon the success with which he met the attacks of Lincoln. On one side an institution supported by history and tradition and on the other a growing sentiment against the holding of a human being in bondage—these presented a supreme issue. Douglas won the senatorial seat for which the two at that time had contested, but Lincoln won a larger victory—he helped to mould the sentiment that was dividing parties and re-arranging the political map of the country. When the debates were concluded every one recognized him as the leader of the cause which he had espoused, and it was a recognition of this leadership which he had secured through his public speeches that enabled him, a western man, to be nominated over the eastern candidates—not only a western man, but a man lacking in book learning and the polish of the schools. No other American president has ever so clearly owed his elevation to his oratory. Washington, Jefferson and Jackson, the presidents usually mentioned in connection with him, were all poor speakers.

In analyzing Lincoln's characteristics as a speaker, one is impressed with the completeness of his equipment. He possessed the two things that are absolutely essential to effective speaking—namely, information and earnestness. If one can be called eloquent who knows what he is talking about and means what he says—and I know of no better definition—Lincoln's speeches were eloquent. He was thoroughly informed upon the subject; he was prepared to meet his opponent upon the general proposition discussed, and upon any deductions which could be drawn from it. There was no unexplored field into which his adversary could lead him, he had carefully examined every foot of the ground and was not afraid of pitfall or ambush, and, what was equally important, he spoke from his own heart to the hearts of those who listened. While the printed page can not fully reproduce the impressions made by a voice trembling with emotion or tender with pathos, one can not read the reports of the debates without feeling that Lincoln regarded the subject as far transcending the ambitions or the personal interests of the debaters. It was of little moment, he said, whether they voted him or Judge Douglas up or down, but it was tremendously important that the question should be decided rightly. His reputation may have suffered in the opinion of some, because he made them think so deeply upon what he said that they, for the moment, forgot him altogether, and yet, is this not the very perfection of speech? It is the purpose of the orator to pursuade and, to do this, he presents, not himself but his subject. Someone in describing the difference between Demosthenes and Cicero said that "when Cicero spoke people said, how well Cicero speaks, but when Demosthenes spoke, they said, let us go against Philip." In proportion as one can forget himself and become wholly absorbed in the cause which he is presenting does he measure up to the requirements of oratory.

In addition to the two essentials, Lincoln possessed what may be called the secondary aids to oratory. He was a master of statement. Few have equalled him in the ability to strip a truth of surplus verbiage and present it in its naked strength. In the Declaration of Independence we read that there are certain self-evident truths, which are therein enumerated. If I were going to amend the proposition, I would say that all truth is self-evident. Not that any truth will be universally accepted, for not all are in a position or in an attitude to accept any given truth. In the interpretation of the parable of the sower, we are told that "the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the truth," and it must be acknowledged that every truth has these or other difficulties to contend with. But a truth may be so clearly stated that it will commend itself to anyone who has not some special reason for rejecting it.

No one has more clearly stated the fundamental objections to slavery than Lincoln stated them, and he had a great advantage over his opponent in being able to state those objections frankly, for Judge Douglas neither denounced nor defended slavery as an institution—his plan embodied a compromise and he could not discuss slavery upon its merits without alienating either the slave-owner or the abolitionist.

Brevity is the soul of wit, and a part of Lincoln's reputation for wit lies in his ability to condense a great deal into a few words. He was epigrammatic. A moulder of thought is not necessarily an originator of the thought moulded. Just as lead moulded into the form of bullets has its effectiveness increased, so thought may have its propagating power enormously increased by being moulded into a form that the eye catches and the memory holds. Lincoln was the spokesman of his party—he gave felicitous expression to the thoughts of his followers.

His Gettysburg speech is not surpassed, if equalled, in beauty, simplicity, force and appropriateness by any speech of the same length of any language. It is the world's model in eloquence, elegance and condensation. He might safely rest his reputation as an orator on that speech alone.

He was apt in illustration—no one more so. A simple story or simile drawn from everyday life flashed before his hearers the argument that he wanted to present. He did not speak over the heads of his hearers, and yet his language was never commonplace. There is strength in simplicity, and Lincoln's style was simplicity itself.

He understood the power of the interrogatory for some of his most powerful arguments were condensed into questions. Of all those who discussed the evils of separation and the advantages to be derived from the preservation of the union, no one ever put the matter more forcibly than Lincoln did when, referring to the possibility of war and the certainty of peace some time, even if the union was divided, he called attention to the fact that the same question would have to be dealt with, and then asked, "Can enemies make treaties easier than friends can make laws?"

He made frequent use of Bible language and of illustrations drawn from Holy Writ. It is said that when he was preparing his Springfield speech of 1858 he spent hours trying to find language that would express the idea that dominated his entire career, namely, that a republic could not permanently endure half free and half slave, and that finally a Bible passage flashed through his mind, and he exclaimed, "I have found it"—"and if a house be divided against itself, that house can not stand," and probably no other Bible passage ever exerted as much influence as this one in the settlement of a great controversy.

I have enumerated some, not all—but the more important—of his characteristics as an orator, and on this day I venture for the moment to turn the thoughts of this audience away from the great work that he accomplished as a patriot, away from his achievements in the line of statecraft, to the means employed by him to bring before the public the ideas which attracted attention to him. His power as a public speaker was the foundation of his success, and while it is obscured by the superstructure that was reared upon it, it can not be entirely overlooked as the returning anniversary of his birth calls increasing attention to the widening influence of his work. With no military career to dazzle the eye or excite the imagination; with no public service to make his name familiar to the reading public, his elevation to the presidency would have been impossible without his oratory. The eloquence of Demosthenes and Cicero were no more necessary to their work, and Lincoln deserves to have his name written on the scroll with theirs.

CONTENTS

"EDUCATING" THE SOUTH

At the tariff hearing in Washington the other day the following colloquy took place:

W. H. Tift of Tifton, Ga., urged a higher duty on the commoner grades of lumber.

"Why do you people in the south vote for low duties and then come up here and ask for the highest?" asked Chairman Payne.

"I did not vote against Mr. Taft," answered the witness. "There were forty thousand votes